



SUNNYSIDE/SNAKE RIVER WILDLIFE AREA 2009 MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Land Management Summary

This is an update to the 2006 Sunnyside/Snake River Wildlife Area (SSWA) Management Plan http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/ that provides management direction for the wildlife area complex. The SSWA includes 21 sub-units, comprising 20,836 acres, which are scattered throughout Walla Walla, Franklin, Benton and Yakima counties. The majority of the sites lie along a 118-mile highway corridor between Lowden in Walla Walla



County and Union Gap in Yakima County. The Franklin County sites lie approximately 35-40 miles north of this corridor.

The plan identifies needs and guides activities on the area based on the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Mission of “*Sound Stewardship of Fish and Wildlife*” and its underlying statewide goals and objectives as they apply to local conditions.

Plans are generally updated annually as habitat and species conditions change, as

new regulations and scientific knowledge develop, as public issues and concerns evolve, and as administration of wildlife areas change. Due to workload constraints, a 2007 update was not completed. This management plan update captures details of 2007 and 2008 accomplishments, new issues and land management strategies, as well as performance measures for 2009.

Updates/Changes

The Wildlife Area staff has remained stable during this reporting period. Luis Medina, our 9-month career seasonal Natural Resource Tech, was formally changed to full time employment. He will still work for nine months on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area, and then transfer to Oak Creek each

Inside

Land Management Summary	1
Updates/Changes	1
New Issues	2
Major Stewardship Accomplishments	2
Status Report of 07-08 Performance Measures	6
New Strategies	10
2009 Performance Measures	11
Citizens Advisory Group Input	11
BPA’s Wildlife Mitigation Program	12

winter to help on the elk-feeding program under separate funding.

The operating budget for 2008 was cut by 15% and for the first time, program income from the agricultural lease had to be tapped to make up the difference. We were able to demonstrate to Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) that a substantial amount of funding comes to the project from alternative sources. This revelation was useful during budget negotiations and the result was a return to previous funding levels.

Operational costs on the project continue to increase due to the higher cost of fuel and the effect that has on goods and services. In preparation for the new 3-year funding cycle, updated budget projections were provided through 2013, with more gross estimates out through fiscal year 2018. These figures were submitted to BPA for consideration and a presentation was given on the wildlife area to the Independent Scientific Review Panel. We are hopeful that this overview of performance, coupled with the request for a modest budget increase, will help assure dedicated funding for the next few years.

New Issues

Four Washington Migratory Bird Stamp grant proposals were submitted and funded for the following activities:

- Adding an overflow pipe to new pond construction in circle #8 on the Windmill Ranch
- Moving an irrigation pump & suction pipe out of the Irrigation District's right-of-way on the Windmill Ranch so they can maintain the canal.
- Obtaining an additional \$200,000 to help buy critical wetland habitat in Franklin County. This would be added to a similar grant that was awarded in the previous funding cycle.
- Repairing the lift pump intake on the Giffen Lake pump on the HQ Unit, which delivers water to the moist soil management cells.

A Salmon Recovery Funding Board grant for \$123,000 was received for shoreline and floodplain restoration on the I-82 Unit. Work will begin late in 2009.

A partnership North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant was previously awarded, which is providing approximately \$333,000 to the SSWA for wetland enhancement on the Byron and HQ units. This is not a new project, but the work is being done in phases. The first phase, on the Byron Unit, has been completed. Groundwork under phase 2 of this project is just beginning. The Yakama Nation will use their share of this million-dollar grant to perform similar work on their lands, which lie across the Yakima River from the HQ and I-82 units of the SSWA. Formal partners in this grant include the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, City of Grandview, the Yakama Nation and the Yakima Chapter of Pheasants Forever.

Major Stewardship Accomplishments

A 5-year old capital budget request finally floated far enough up the list to receive funding for the construction of a badly needed shop facility on the Headquarters Unit (HQ). That facility is now completed.

Weed control was performed on 920 acres on the Sunnyside units and 150 acres on the Snake River units over this two-year reporting period.

Approximately 20 acres of Russian olive trees were removed on the Byron Unit to reduce the monoculture and make way for more native herbaceous and woody plant species. Herbicide treatments were used on re-sprouts and the release of wheatgrass was sufficient that no reseeding was needed. The last of the 30-acre patch of olives was removed on the Johnson segment of the HQ unit, where wetland enhancement work will occur under the NAWCA grant.



Russian Olive removal on the HQ Unit. Note the excavator in the lower left corner. This will be the site of new wetland development under the NAWCA grant.

On Byron, numerous plots, totaling about 50 acres, were chemically fallowed, tilled and seeded to native grasses. These plots are low-lying swales with enough effective moisture to support dense stands of Russian knapweed. Most of this restoration was highly successful.



New grass to replace a monoculture of Russian knapweed on the Byron Unit.

Coordination with Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District (SVID) resulted in the installation of a water diversion that was installed in Sulphur Creek Irrigation Wasteway. An easement and water use agreement was quickly finalized with SVID so the diversion could be built before water backed up behind their new fish passage barrier. The barrier was necessary due to the false attraction the wasteway has on migrating salmonids. The diversion

structure will complement the NAWCA construction project by supplying additional water to the new wetland system. A contract is in place for phase 2 of the grant, which will include construction of water control structures through the wetland complex.



The new fish passage barrier in Sulphur Creek. The concrete box in the background, on the right bank, is the new diversion that will deliver water, via gravity flow, to the new NAWCA wetland.

Phase I of the NAWCA grant was implemented. This included the replacement of the original water control structure, which was built in 1947. This allowed us to manage water levels for a controlled burn and a Rotenone treatment for carp control. Emergent vegetation had become extremely dense and the controlled

burn served two purposes: 1) plant succession was set back, and 2) all open water was fully exposed for the Rotenone treatment. The last carp control project was in 1985. Following the removal of carp, 10,000 young bluegills were released to feed on any carp fry that entered the system.



Typical decadent emergent growth on Byron Ponds before the controlled burn.



Same photo after the burn. Our observations have shown that early successional wetlands result in higher wildlife diversity and use.

Prior to the NAWCA work and carp removal project a volunteer with Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account (ALEA) funding initiated a marsh bird study on Byron and other project wetlands to determine the effects of wetland manipulation. He collected baseline information before the treatments began and is continuing to collect follow-up data. The target species for this

study include American bittern, pied-billed grebe, Virginia rail, Sora and American coot. Data collected one year after our wetland treatment on Byron showed the detection rate of all species nearly doubled. Recorded calls were used to detect the presence of these reclusive species.

On the Windmill Ranch, with program income and a Migratory Bird Stamp grant, two ponds were excavated in a low-lying area within an irrigated field. These excavated areas collect irrigation water over the course of the season and provide additional duck hunting opportunity on the ranch.

With a Migratory Bird Stamp grant, a new tracked All Season Vehicle was purchased for use in managing wetlands. This low ground pressure rig can maneuver in soft, moist ground where other equipment cannot travel.



Ducks leaving the newly constructed ponds on the Windmill Ranch

Status Report of 2007 & 2008 Performance Measures

Key performance measures are generally identified each year to monitor progress and identify any issues that might interfere with planned priority activities. However, the 2007 update was not completed due to workload constraints. This information will be used to delete, add or alter priority strategies for 2009.

2007/2008 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ Related Activity/ Comments
Update all agricultural leases to cash rent agreements with terms of five years.	Done, although they are staggered, depending on when they were finalized. Six agriculture leases and two grazing leases are administered on the SSWA.	Cash rental agreements provide more flexibility to use program income to upgrade facilities, irrigation systems, etc., when other fund sources are lacking. Actual crop shares are sometimes hard to use or market. Grazing is mostly for cornstalk residue with one agreement for cheatgrass control under powerlines where fires are prevalent. Initial results on the latter were very favorable.
Control Russian knapweed on 50 acres of moist swales on Byron and reseed to native grasses	A 3-year process. Grasses will reach maturity in 2009	For this particular application of habitat restoration, we have developed a successful technique that is cost-effective. It will be expanded to additional areas.
Implement first stage of the shared NAWCA grant on Byron. This includes a carp removal project, funded by the State Migratory Bird Stamp program.	Done	Some relocation of beaver necessary so water control structure operates as designed.
Remove Russian olive trees on Byron and the HQ units to prepare for habitat enhancement projects	Actually removed about 20 acres on Byron and 30 acres on the HQ unit. On Byron, the trees were stacked in windrows and will be left for wildlife cover. On the HQ, they are in the floodplain and will be burned to make room for wetland development.	Existing tall wheatgrass was released by this activity on Byron. The site on the HQ unit will be managed as a moist soil area.

Perform weed control on minimum of 500 combined acres on all units.	Actually treated 730 acres in 2007 and 340 in 2008.	Gave up trying to hire a temporary weed technician for Franklin Co. after two failed attempts.
Maintain 140 acres of moist soil management areas	Ongoing	Challenges for this activity are water availability, controlled beaver activity at water control structures and problem-free pumps
Maintain shop, office, storage buildings	Coordinated with Engineers & contractor on the construction of a new 24' X 60' shop	Moved some shop equipment & tools to the new shop. Use the old shop for storage.
Maintain signs, kiosks, boundary fences, etc.	Replace signs as needed due to weathering or vandalism. Removed old fence on Byron that was exposed after a controlled burn on emergent vegetation	Kiosks and parking lot signs are vandalized weekly. Without additional enforcement, it is time and cost prohibitive to stay ahead of the vandals. Many boundary fences are in need of repair or replacement, but this work continues to be put off due to lack of staff, funding and the fact that cattle trespass is minimal on most areas.
Outreach and education coordination	Continued working with Yakama Nation on details of implementing NAWCA grant. Continued coordination with SVID on successful plan to divert Sulphur Creek water & manipulate Byron water for wetland enhancement. Completed formal, signed agreements for both purposes. Continued working with local schools on field trip studies involving wetlands, bird nest boxes and riparian plantings.	Substantial coordination began on a project to remove fill material from the new NAWCA wetland before water is diverted into it. SVID, the Port of Sunnyside and local contractors are all interested in this fill material.
Develop alternative water sources where needed. Develop one perennial spring	Installed two structures to impound deeper water in one of two perennial springs on Thornton.	Still need to repair the dike, which was heavily damaged by off-road traffic
Coordinate with research staff to collect HEP and species population data.	Did not perform this support work.	Continued coordinating with science staff so we can develop a program to adequately track mitigation progress on BPA-funded wildlife areas.

Monitor for presence of sage grouse on Rattlesnake Slope and Thornton	Did not perform this work	BPA advised us that they would no longer pay for species monitoring and this task was dropped from our statement of work.
Monitor public use and Register to Hunt programs where they have been implemented	Some work performed, mostly during the hunting season, but coverage was marginal	There is not enough staff time available to adequately monitor public use. Register to Hunt booths in Franklin County help collect user data. BPA will not fund this type of data collection on Sunnyside units.
Monitor for trespass	The primary cattle trespass issue on the I-82 Unit has ended. Periodic vehicle trespass on Thornton seems to be diminishing with increased monitoring by Enforcement.	Limited staff time to monitor these areas adequately, and no authority to deal with the issues as they occur.
Monitor and maintain assigned access areas	Ongoing, although littering and dumping is rampant at Yakima County sites.	This activity takes a lot of time away from habitat enhancement projects. The new enforcement officer stationed in Prosser seems to have relieved some of the pressure.
Monitor grazing permits	Grazing on cornstalk residue on the Windmill Ranch and HQ Units requires minimal effort. Close monitoring of the experimental cheatgrass grazing project on Windmill was performed by Mel Asher.	This is a 3-year agreement to see if grazing cheatgrass to reduce annual seed production can reduce the plant population and release native bunchgrass for habitat enhancement and fire control under BPA powerlines. After two years of monitoring, it was determined a third year was not necessary due to the decreased incidence in cheatgrass.
Plant and/or maintain 6 food plots	Done, although weeds were not adequately controlled	Lack of time, due to excessive administration duties.

Work out logistics to fund a shared weed control person with the Columbia Basin WA	We determined this was not the most feasible option for the SSWA	A proposal, submitted to the Bureau of Reclamation to fund ½ of an FTE, came at the beginning of their 3-year funding cycle. The soonest this proposal can be considered is 2010. It should be re-submitted in 2009.
Coordinate with ADA representatives to discuss options for additional disabled use on the SSWA	Formalized an ADA upland bird hunting program on Bottom Rupley (HQ Unit), complete with mowed trails and signs. Installed a new gate with combo lock. Initiated a special permit hunt for elk on Thornton, which allows partial vehicle access for disabled hunters.	First year of the Thornton elk hunt was successful with two disabled hunters + companions taking two elk. The second year was fraught with complaints by an unprepared hunter. The upland bird program on the HQ unit proved successful in its first year but the new gate was destroyed within three months.
Monitor closed roads monthly on all units. More often if time permits.	Generally, this schedule is maintained, but it's inadequate.	Not enough time to get around to all the sites on a more frequent basis.
Coordinate with Benton and Franklin Mosquito Control Districts	Coordination is generally passive unless issues arise. Summarized control efforts for 2007 & 2008 by Benton Co. MCD, and sent to WDFW staff	Several positive West Nile Virus hits in 2007 & 2008 resulted in more extensive control efforts. Found unauthorized use of gambusia (mosquito-eating fish) in Byron ponds.
Produce quarterly and annual BPA reports. Submit work plans and associated budgets	Done and accepted.	Budget was cut in 2008 but has been reinstated for 2009
Coordinate with local fire districts	Ongoing. Benton County continues to disc fire line on Rattlesnake Slope.	This augments our weed-free access road/fire line. However, the fire district does not perform this work at the right time of year, which is counter-productive for fire abatement and control.
Continue to coordinate for cultural resource surveys	As needed for ground disturbing activities. BPA staff checked out Russian olive removal sites.	
Attend training to maintain licenses	Red card, first aid and pesticide classes were attended by appropriate staff	

New Strategies

The wildlife area plan identifies many strategies or activities to address the agencies strategic plan goals and objectives, why the area was purchased, habitat conditions, species presence, and public issues and concerns. The following updated strategies have been added to respond to previously unaddressed or new issues or changes on the wildlife area. New strategies may also be in response to adaptive management as staff evaluate the impacts of past management activities.

The CAG Team was largely unresponsive to solicitation for comments on the final draft of the Wildlife Area Plan. One member had no comments and the other provided several comments but many were requesting clarity on existing issues. Since that time, the W.A. Manager has conducted business with only District Team oversight. No new strategies will be implemented in 2009 that resulted from the CAG Team, District Team, or public comments received. Four strategies are being added due to proposals submitted, and secured for Migratory Bird Stamp funding. Two additional strategies are added to address flood damage and unanticipated damage to a culvert, the latter of which is affecting public access to one of our access areas.

Agency Objective: Protect, restore and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats.

1. Implement 3 projects, funded by the Migratory Bird Stamp program

- A. *Strategy:* Repair Giffen Lake Pump intake structure to assure continuation of moist soil management capability on the HQ Unit.
- B. *Strategy:* Install an overflow in the circle 8 ponds on the Windmill Ranch so we can manage the site for waterfowl in a way that is compatible with the agricultural program.
- C. *Strategy:* Continue pursuing the acquisition of the Mesa Lake property with any and all funds that may be available, including a NAWCA grant, the Wetland Reserve Program, and RCO grants.

Agency Objective: Provide sound operational management of WDFW lands, facilities & access sites.

1. Perform O&M on all facilities in the face of unexpected circumstances

- A. *Strategy:* Move an irrigation pump station out of the irrigation district's right of way on the Windmill Ranch, per their request. (funded by Migratory Bird Stamp)
- B. *Strategy:* Make repairs to all flood-related damages on the HQ Unit and pursue reimbursement through FEMA.
- C. *Strategy:* Replace a collapsed culvert in the access road into the Fitzsimonds access area on the I-82 Unit.

2009 Performance Measures

Performance measures for the Sunnyside/Snake River Wildlife Area are listed below. Accomplishments and progress toward desired outcomes will be monitored and evaluated annually. The current Wildlife Area Manager will be retiring on June 30 and it is unknown when a replacement will be hired. Performance measures are tied to ongoing projects, which may or may not be completed by the incoming manager.

- 1) Maintain 50 acres of new grass seeding on Byron. Maintain 30 acres of new grass seeding on the HQ unit.
- 2) Maintain 16 acres of new, warm season grasses on the Windmill Ranch, which were planted to provide competition for the noxious bristly foxtail.
- 3) Continue coordination with multiple partners to complete the final stages of the NAWCA grant.
- 4) Assist with the completion of a Columbia Basin NAWCA grant and other grant options to purchase the Mesa Lake property.
- 5) Control a minimum of 300 acres of noxious weeds across all segments of the SSWA.
- 6) Implement 3 separate Migratory Bird Stamp grants (relocate pump station on circle #9 on Windmill; install an overflow pipe in the circle #8 ponds on Windmill; repair the Giffen Lake lift pump intake).
- 7) Continue coordinating with a volunteer's survey of reclusive wetland species on Byron & Windmill wetlands.
- 8) Make repairs to damaged water collection facilities on Thornton.
- 9) Finalize an agreement with the Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District for the removal of fill material prior to the filling of the new NAWCA wetland, which will include property improvements as in-kind payment.
- 10) Prior to retirement, draft a detailed operational plan for the new manager, which describes in detail, the issues relating to each management unit.

Citizens Advisory Group Input

Due to the lack of comment from the CAG on the draft of the original Wildlife Area Plan, and after only periodic attendance at the scheduled meetings, the Wildlife Area Manager chose, without authority, to end the CAG's involvement in the planning process. Selection and maintenance of a CAG is a time consuming process, and is made effective only with complete involvement by the members. A CAG is an important aspect in the planning process and the new manager should consider establishing a new one, with members who are willing to participate more fully in the process.

Want to see the full plan?

Go to –

http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/

Contacts:

Wildlife Area Manager
(509) 545-2420
WDFW Yakima Office
(509) 457-9313

Information for BPA's Wildlife Mitigation Program

The Sunnyside Wildlife Area became a Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) mitigation project in 1997. The wildlife area encompasses approximately 10,538 acres along the floodplain of the Yakima River and the upland area along Rattlesnake Ridge. The BPA has received mitigation credits for funding habitat enhancement and ongoing management of habitat on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area. The project provides habitat units (HUs) towards BPA's overall Wildlife Mitigation Debt for the Columbia River hydroelectric system. Habitat Units for this project are related to a portion of mitigation for impacts from the Grand Coulee, McNary and John Day Dams. The number of habitat units achieved are based on the sampling of a number of habitat characteristics that are components of mathematical models for individual species that generate a numeric value of habitat quality from zero to one, known as a Habitat Suitability Index. The suitability index is then multiplied by the number of acres being evaluated to generate the number of HUs. This process is commonly referred to as a Habitat Evaluation Procedure or HEP. Species models being applied to mitigation activities on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area include: mallard, western meadowlark, Canada goose, yellow warbler, downy woodpecker, California quail, black-capped chickadee, great blue heron, mule deer and sage grouse.

Most of the management strategies relating to habitat management identified in the Sunnyside Wildlife Area Management Plan are funded through BPA's mitigation program. A summary of these activities can be found in our most recent project review and funding proposal to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council who provides oversight of BPA's mitigation programs. The Sunnyside Wildlife Area Proposal (Project #200201400) is located at: <http://www.nwcouncil.org/Fw/budget/2010/proposal.asp?id=1007#3>. This document includes a summary of activities (work elements), a link to the project narrative, an itemized budget request for 2010-2012, and estimated budgets through 2018.

A number of activities are included in the mitigation work plan that are designed to monitor the effectiveness of the project including habitat/plant community monitoring, wildlife population response, and periodic HEP surveys to track progress toward mitigation goals. Wildlife response surveys have been suspended for two years due to a decision by BPA to not fund wildlife monitoring. Hopefully this decision will be reevaluated.

The Sunnyside Wildlife Area project compliments the Yakima Tribe's "Yakima Nation Riparian and Wetland Restoration Project", and the "Yakima River Side Channels Project". Like the Sunnyside Wildlife Area, both Yakima Nation projects are BPA funded mitigation projects.

While BPA funds most of the habitat management activity on the wildlife area, other contributions have come from outside sources including grants obtained in cooperation with Ducks Unlimited, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Salmon Recovery Funding Board, City of Grandview, the Yakama Nation, the Yakima Chapter of Pheasants Forever, Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District and others. These grants have helped to fund many of the wetland, shoreline and shrub-steppe enhancement projects on the wildlife area.

This BPA funded mitigation project provides habitat for both threatened and endangered, Priority Habitat Species (PHS) and is an important link in WDFW's ongoing efforts to protect, enhance, and increase wetland and shrub-steppe habitats for associated wildlife species and to improve water quality for both anadromous and resident fish alike.